

Moscow Cautioned Against Embargo

Talks on Economic Issues Could Be Put at Risk, White House Says

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Five sets of upcoming U.S.-Soviet talks on economic issues ranging from trade to civil aviation could be put at risk if the Soviet Union follows through on its threat to impose an embargo on raw materials entering Lithuania, senior administration officials said yesterday.

U.S. and Soviet negotiators are scheduled to resume talks on the economic issues during the next three weeks, but all of the sessions could be postponed or cancelled if the situation in Lithuania worsens, officials said.

President Bush and his top aides have refused to specify what steps, if any, the United States would take if the Soviets move to institute the embargo they threatened last Friday. White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater maintained that silence yesterday while reiterating the administration's call for the Soviets to begin discussions with Lithuania and refrain from using force or coercion against the Baltic republic, which declared its independence last month.

Meanwhile, the administration's policy was endorsed yesterday by Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine), who met last week with Soviet President Mikhail

Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders and with two delegations of Lithuanian officials in Europe.

Mitchell said yesterday he believes a compromise solution to the Soviet-Lithuanian conflict is still possible and he urged the administration to proceed cautiously in the dispute.

Administration officials, reflecting Bush's caution on the subject, said yesterday that no steps have

Mitchell endorsed the administration's policy.

yet been taken to postpone any of the U.S.-Soviet talks and that the president has not discussed the issue with his top advisers.

Administration officials said the talks that could be jeopardized include a new round of negotiations on expanded civil aviation between the two countries scheduled to begin April 24. The same day, a third round of talks aimed at reaching a U.S.-Soviet commercial agreement on trade and other issues is scheduled to begin.

In early May, officials said, talks

on proposed investment and tax treaties between the two countries and negotiations on a maritime transportation agreement are scheduled.

Most of the threatened talks grow out of the Malta summit conference at which Bush unveiled a series of initiatives aimed at producing closer economic and trade ties between the Soviet Union and the West. In that December session, Bush targeted his next summit conference with Gorbachev, now set for May 30-June 3, for completion of a trade agreement granting most-favored-nation status to the Soviets and asked that negotiations on a commercial trade agreement begin immediately.

Mitchell yesterday supported Bush's declaration that any Soviet use of force in Lithuania would have adverse consequences for U.S.-Soviet relations and said that Bush is correct in not specifying in advance what actions he would take.

He gave no indication he would support congressional sanctions independent of administration action and conveyed a sense that the United States needed to think carefully about the consequences for Gorbachev of any action this country might take.

Many of the Soviet officials his delegation met "urged us to take into account Gorbachev's position in what

we said and did toward Lithuania," Mitchell said. A recent non-binding Senate resolution, expressing support for the Lithuanian cause, "only helped the hard-liners," Mitchell quoted the Soviet officials as saying. They asked the senators, "Do you want him [Gorbachev] out?"

The Soviet president himself remarked "a couple times," Mitchell said, that "I know there's a lot of speculation, 'Will Gorbachev survive?' " But he impressed Mitchell as being "very well physically" and characteristically sharp mentally. "But obviously he faces a lot of problems," Mitchell added.

Mitchell said that in his judgment, nationality problems pose an even greater threat to Gorbachev than the worsening economy. He told of a conversation with officials from Uzbekistan and Estonia, in which the former was complaining bitterly about conditions in his republic. "Will you secede?" Mitchell said he asked. And before he could get an answer, the Estonian broke in to say, "He's got to get in line."

Mitchell said it was evident that Gorbachev's "popularity is declining," but said the "paradox is . . . the longer the process of democratization goes on, the more indispensable he becomes."

He said Gorbachev's recent move in creating a presidency for himself, separate from the Communist Party structure, was designed in part to change a legal situation "in which he could have been removed at any time. Now, the whole society has a stake in his serving his term . . . very shrewd thing."